

The Ladies' Table

Louise Farmer Smith

At breakfast we are all sleepy and feel barely put together, and Sally has not yet straightened out her waking life from what she dreamed. "Do I have the hiccups?" she asks me.

"Don't you know?" Mrs. Wordell says, glowering. She's the only one at our table who is always cross.

"Maybe it's just a charley horse." Ernestine sits across from Sally and is trying to be helpful. She gives her black wig a little push to get it off her forehead. The wig is her only gesture at grooming.

Sally, on the other hand, was once a beauty and has hung onto those hormones that cause her to go every week to the beauty parlor to keep her long curls bleached blonde although she has lost so much else including one of her front teeth. She sits on my left at all our meals, which is good, because she needs to ask me what people are saying or other things, things that are hard for her to remember, like whether to eat her green beans with her dinner fork. This should be easy for everyone because Heatherington Manor is not the sort of place that sets the table with more than one fork. I used to eat with Sally on the Second Floor—Assisted Living—but she was moved up here to a semi-private room with a curtain for a door when her dementia became obvious. I was moved later for a less obvious loss of capacity.

By lunch, creamed chicken today, we have all waked up and are a little better dressed and have not yet suffered the toll the long afternoons sometimes take on us. So the conversation is better. Mrs. Wordell, who cultivates a grim authority, is dressed in the gray suit she wears every day. Sally's blond tresses lay on the shoulders of a green chiffon dress of an outdated cut but timeless femininity. Ernestine, whose wig is perfectly pinned on now, begins talking about Warren: "'Here chicky, here chicky.' He just runs after that little thing. He is so cute."

"Warren, your son, running after a chick?" Mrs. Wordell is glowering again.

Ernestine responds by raising her voice, "Here Chicky!"

Sally glances at me, then looks at her lap, a little girl panicked to hear the adults quarrelling. She won't be able to eat now, even though she isn't the one Mrs. Wordell is impatient with.

"I taught school for thirty years," Mrs. Wordell begins her daily harangue, her attempt to lord it over us, so I rush to say, "My children loved Easter chicks and the little bunnies we bought at the TG&Y."

"Warren is so good with that little bunny," Ernestine says.

"I thought it was a *chick!*" Mrs. Wordell bites off her words. "When was this?"

When is always a hard question, and Ernestine colors and swallows before lifting her chin and saying, "Easter. Easter Sunday."

"My mother always made us new hats for Easter," I say, hoping to steer us out of the rough water. "I had a white straw sailor with a navy ribbon."

"Oh, yes," Sally says, smiling. "Paul was in the Navy."

Mrs. Wordell stops sawing her pork chop and glares at Sally.

"He was!" Sally says, fearless where her husband is concerned. "Just ask him. He'll tell you."

Mrs. Wordell drops her knife on her plate with a big clank. We are all quiet. We know Sally's husband was in the Navy and died 20 years ago, and we know that Ernestine's son, Warren, died in Vietnam; at least Mrs. Wordell and I know, and maybe by afternoon Ernestine will have caught up with her own life.

"He was so cute. Little short linen pants," Ernestine says.

"Linen is always appropriate for Easter," I offer.

Sally leans toward me. "What are we talking about?"

"Linen," I whisper.

"Lenin? He was a Communist," Sally says. "He was their big brain."

Mrs. Wordell looks at the ceiling and brings both fists down so hard the forks clatter on the plates. Sally and Ernestine flash me frightened looks. All the other eyes in the dining room turn to our table as the thunder of Mrs. Wordell's fists and the clanging plates crash over and over. I watch a tear roll out of the corner of Mrs. Wordell's eye. She is insulted by their confusion as though she, a teacher for thirty years, has been unjustly put in the dumb class. I want to tell her to give up trying to tie us down to the date on the newspaper or the facts of our lives. We have let go of all that and float on whatever grace we have left. Time shifts under our feet, often landing us in a better place. ☞